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ABSTRACT

The Centre for Continuing Education and Stevenson College of Edinburgh University offer an access course to prepare nontraditional adult students for entry into degree courses in the faculties of arts, divinity, law, and social sciences. A qualitative case study examined why students discontinue the access course. Questionnaires were mailed to all 36 students who had enrolled in the course in 1989-90, 1990-91, and the first term of 1991-92 but had withdrawn before completing it. Most of the 14 respondents reported leaving the course for a combination of reasons. Course dissatisfaction was cited as the main reason for withdrawal four times and as an additional reason three times. Financial problems were cited twice as the main reason for withdrawing and seven times as an additional reason. Ill health was mentioned seven times, personal changes/problems were mentioned six times, loss of confidence in abilities and age were each mentioned four times, and pressure of juggling roles was cited three times. Women were more likely to experience excessive outside pressures. Responses regarding available academic facilities and support were mixed. Personal support services were generally not being used effectively, and respondents' attitudes toward staff development and quality of teaching depended largely on their previous educational experiences. (Contains 16 references.) (MN)

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THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH
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OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES: NO 2

"WEIGHING IT UP": A CASE STUDY OF DISCONTINUING ACCESS STUDENTS

MAIRI-ANN CULLEN

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"Weighing it up":
A Case Study of Discontinuing Access Students

Mairi-Ann Cullen

Foreword

This Occasional Paper has a dual significance. In the first place it addresses an issue of considerable general interest, namely the way in which unqualified adults achieve entry into higher education – or rather, in the case of this specific paper – the ways in which they do not achieve it. At a time when there is widespread concern, amongst students, parents, prospective students (who may also be parents) and the population as a whole about the future shape of higher education, it is useful to have evidence on the experience of a small number of those who have come close to entering but who have not, so far, made it through the portals.

But the origins of the paper are also interesting. The author was a student on a Masters course run by a sister department in Edinburgh University – the MSc in Community Education. The paper is the product of research which she carried out for her degree. It is very pleasing to be able to publish work which is the product of such a partnership, and an outcome which should be an encouragement to all those students currently tackling similar projects. Too much work is done which never sees the light of day.

The theme of the paper is non-completion. This is not a weasel word, a euphemism for failure. In some instances, non-completion is the most successful outcome, with the student making a positive choice to move on. In other cases it may be that failure is involved, on the part of the student and of the institution. Certainly the research threw up some criticisms of the way in which the Centre handles this aspect of its provision, and these have been taken seriously and have influenced practice. But the paper shows how diverse the range of experiences is. It illustrates the challenges which face those responsible for provision in this area, but also raises questions about the standards we use to judge 'success' or 'failure'. This, as well as the general theme of access, looks likely to be one of the dominant issues for higher education in the future.

Tom Schuller (on behalf of the Editorial Committee)

Mairi-Ann Cullen

Mairi-Ann Cullen works at the Scottish Council for Research in Education as a research assistant on a project about values education in Scottish primary schools. She took degrees in literature and medieval history at the Universities of Edinburgh and Oxford before returning to Edinburgh University for an MSc in Community Education.

"Weighing it up": A Case Study of Discontinuing Access Students

Introduction

Access courses have been specifically designed with the aim of enabling adults who have missed out on university education to prepare for entry to degree courses. This case study offers an account of a small research project which investigated reasons why some Access students left one particular course without completing it. There are four main sections. The first section describes the context, aims, and methodology of the research. The second provides details about the respondents. In the third section, the focus is on the reasons given for leaving the course, while the fourth section concentrates on areas where action by course providers could help students to complete courses. The main argument of this article is that these students weighed the pros and cons of being on the course and left when negative experiences weighed too heavily. This interpretation allows discontinuing students to be portrayed as competent adults coping with life, rather than the usual image of them as deficient students. It also highlights the opportunities for course providers to take action to relieve some of the problem areas often regarded as insignificant.

1. About the Research

Context of the Research

The research on which this case study is based was carried out as part of a ten week placement with the Centre for Continuing Education, Edinburgh University. The Centre, along with Stevenson College, runs an Access course on a part-time basis over one or two years offering entry to degree courses in the Faculties of Arts, Divinity, Law and Social Sciences. The course aims to maximise opportunities for the students while also minimising the risk of failure. The issue of students discontinuing the course was felt to be an area worth investigating as part of a continuous process of course evaluation. In addition, course supervisors felt that the reasons students gave to them for leaving were likely to be "acceptable" reasons rather than deeper underlying ones.

Aims of the Research

The aims of the research were, therefore, to discover a more detailed picture of reasons for students discontinuing the Edinburgh University/Stevenson College Access course; to discover whether the existing support system was effective; and to examine implications for course curriculum, student selection, and student support. In addition, it was felt appropriate to take the opportunity to find out about the quality of students' experience of the course. It will be clear from this list of aims that the research aimed to elicit qualitative information specific to one course; however, the findings are, I think, of wider interest.

Research Methodology

The methodology first envisaged was an in-depth, semi-structured interview by a person not directly involved with either the Access course or its joint providers. My position as an adult returner to education, engaged in an integral part of my own course requirements, fitted this need for neutrality. Given the notorious difficulty of successfully contacting students who have not completed a course, the methodology was subsequently made as flexible as possible - interviews were offered either face-to-face in a place to suit the student or over the telephone, both at times to suit the student. Questionnaires were also offered for those who did not wish to be interviewed.

A conversation guide was prepared for use in the interviews and, to preserve a degree of parity, this was used as a numbered questionnaire also. The conversation guide covered factors which previous studies show affect students' decision to leave a course. Thus, it covered other commitments, changes in circumstances, academic and social aspects of the course, the students' aims, their prediction of problems, as well as pre-course guidance and demographic factors. The most important aspect which was added to these was a question asking the respondents to define what "good teaching" meant to them, based on their own experiences. This allowed meaningful use to be made of later responses which generated criticism and praise of the teaching experienced on the Access course; it also served as a non-threatening topic which allowed the respondent to settle in to that role. This topic area, in addition, generated data on previous educational experiences and the feelings associated with these: one student, for example, explained that, "it all went wrong in primary school."

Since the schedule covered areas which were personal and possibly threatening, I tried to conduct the interviews in a manner which approximated to a conversation. I did not worry if the exact schedule wording or ordering of questions was lost but I did try to cover all relevant questions at some point in the interview. There was no appreciable difference in quality of information obtained between interviews conducted on the telephone and those

conducted in person: both methods produced detailed information about the experience of being on the course and about reasons for leaving. Neither did place of interview seem to matter: three were conducted in the Education Department coffee room, two in the interviewee's home, and one in a cafe. Although all questions were answered, the responses obtained through the questionnaire were much less detailed than those obtained from interview, possibly because writing the answers out was time-consuming. Everyone who took part was sent a personal thank you letter and offered a copy of the final research report summary.

Since this was qualitative research which aimed at eliciting respondents' perceptions, the key findings are presented for discussion. No claims are being made that the findings can be generalised. The findings represent my account of the views of people who left the Access course; it may be that different views would be voiced by students from the same year groups who completed the course.

2. THE RESPONDENTS

All students who enrolled on the course for 1989/90, 1990/91 or 1991/92, but had withdrawn before completing it, were contacted by letter. A follow up letter was sent to those who did not respond to the first. A stamped addressed envelope was enclosed with both letters. The outer envelope was marked "If undelivered, please return to sender" and "Please forward, if necessary" in an attempt to monitor change of address as a factor inhibiting contact. As can be seen in Table 1 below, change of address was a major factor affecting response, particularly in the 1989/90 cohort. Of the initial thirty-six discontinuing students, no less than ten had moved on from the last address known to the Access course organisers. A further eight failed to respond. Obviously, there could be many reasons for this but, since there is no evidence, I do not wish to speculate.

TABLE 1 RESPONSE

	1989/90	1990/91	1991/92 (FIRST TERM)
TOTAL CONTACTED	17	16	3
REPLIED	5	11	2
LETTER RETURNED*	8	2	0
NO RESPONSE	4	3	1

* INDICATES UNKNOWN CHANGE OF ADDRESS

Two people replied but stated, without giving reasons, that they did not want to provide information; two others sent notes explaining why they left but did not want further contact; three people returned questionnaires and eleven people were interviewed (5 by telephone, 6 in person). This article is based on the responses of the fourteen people who provided detailed information, supplemented where appropriate by the information in the notes sent.

Demographic Details

Table 2, below, sets out the demographic details of the respondents. They described themselves using categories suggested on the schedule.

Table 2 Demographic Details

		1989/90		1990/91		1991/92	
		FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE
Sex		2	2	7	1	1	1
Working class		1	2	2	1	1	1
Middle class		1	0	5	0	0	0
Employed*	p/t	1	0	3	0	1	0
	f/t	1	1	1	0	0	1
	not	0	1	3	1	0	0
Age*	20s	1	1	4	0	0	0
	30s	1	0	3	0	1	0
	40s	0	0	0	0	0	1
	60s	0	1	0	1	0	0
Were parents		2	2	7	1	1	not

* when Access course began

Particularly worth noticing is the fact that the respondents, with one exception, were parents. Two male respondents had adult children (although one of these men had frequent caring responsibilities for some of his nine grand-children). The other students were parents of dependent children, some of pre-school age. Three of the women were single parents. Nine of the fourteen respondents were also working while on the Access course. These factors indicate something of the complexities of the lives of mature students, complexities which it is all too easy for educational establishments to ignore or to dismiss as indicators of adult returners' deficiencies as students.

3. Reasons for leaving the Course

The research showed that most people left due to a combination of reasons and that often the reason given at the time was only either the last straw or the least threatening reason to reveal. I felt strongly that the literature on reasons for "drop-out" had over-simplified the matter and had not done justice to the adults involved. For example, it is usual for research accounts to separate out "personal reasons" from other reasons for leaving a course. I felt this practice ignored the social pressures and problems which students faced and placed them in a position of individual responsibility. Table 3 (overleaf) is an attempt to give a concise representation of the dynamic interplay of factors affecting decisions to leave. It provides details of why people left, which reasons were the most important, and how the decision to leave related to initial aims for the course.

This last seemed to be an important factor in the decision to leave: people did weigh up what they had hoped to get out of the course against what they felt they were getting and left when the discrepancy became too great. On one side of the balance were all the positive aspects of being an Access student – realising personal aims and ambitions, increased self-confidence, sharing experiences, escaping from the house, using intellectual capacities: on the other side of the balance were the negative aspects – difficulties with child-care, problems with partners, with employers, lack of money, problems with the academic work, dissatisfactions with the course, and the burden of a legacy of bad feelings about gender, class, age, educational experience.

Perhaps the best way to show how Table 3 works is to look at some examples. Student One had applied for the Access course because her aim was to go to university and get a degree. However, while on the course, a close relative became fatally ill. Since she was also dissatisfied with the standard of tutoring in the subjects she had chosen to study, Student One decided that her immediate aim in life was no longer going to university. She left to nurse her relative and put her initial aim on the back burner. Student Eleven also applied for the Access course because she wanted to go to university. Almost as soon as the course started, she was offered a place at university. With her initial aim fulfilled, she left the Access course satisfied. Student Five, on the other hand, began the course with the aim of discovering if the academic life was for her. She soon realised that the academic way of learning did not suit her and this, coupled with the financial loss entailed in being a part-time student and the feeling of having lost out through being ill early in the term, added up to her decision to leave. But she, too, left feeling satisfied that her aim (finding out if the academic life was for her) had been fulfilled. Student Thirteen began the course with the aim of going to university. However, she found herself under a great deal of financial pressure. Looking ahead, she saw that if she succeeded in going to university it would mean four years of financial struggle and debt. Knowing that she could not live with debt, she decided going to university was no longer an aim in her life and she left the course. Apart

Table 3 Reasons for Leaving

* = main reason. + = additional reason.

	Respondent															
	{ 1989/90				}	{ 1990/91								}	{ 1991/92 }	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Course dissatisfaction(s)	+	*		*	*		+		+	*						
Change/trouble in personal life	*						+	*	*					+		*
Ill-health					+	*		+		+		*		+	*	
Financial		*	+		+		+		+	+			*		+	+
Moved house						*			+							
Better option materialised			*								*					
Pressure of juggling roles							*		*					+		
Loss of confidence in abilities									+	+		+		*		
Lack of group support							+	+								
Difficulty of child-care										+				+		
Class				+												
Age		+						+				+	+			
Initial aim**	A	B	C	B	C	B	B	B	B	B	C	B	D	B	B	B

** A = aim declined in importance
B = aim unrealistic in these circumstances
C = aim fulfilled
D = aim changed

from anything else, these four cases indicate how false an impression raw data can give. So often numbers of students not completing a course are taken as a negative indicator, yet this qualitative study shows that beneath the figures lie adult students' varied aims and purposes in life.

The biggest group of respondents were those who left the course because their initial aim no longer seemed realistic. Since I will argue that these represent the type of students course providers should do more for, I will look at one case in detail. The starred entry for Student Ten indicates that the main reason she left the course was that she was dissatisfied with it. Her initial aim had been to do the Access course in order to go to university to study law. She had two children, the younger not yet at school, so she decided to do the course over two years. During her first year she was told that the entrance requirement

for law was two B-grade passes in the final exams. At the end of her first year, she felt "disillusioned" that her concern at not achieving as good a pass as she expected in her exam had been brushed aside by course staff. She said she was told that first year exams did not mean anything but, as she explained ruefully:

> They might not mean anything to them, but they were important to me!

When, early in her second year, the requirements for entry to Law were raised, with no warning or adequate explanation, to two A-grade passes, she left.

So far, I have given an account of her main reason for leaving, but it does not really help us to understand why she left. The answer lies in the other four factors that she mentioned as contributing to her decision - ill-health, financial problems, loss of confidence, and difficulties with child-care. During the whole of her first year, she had struggled with the intertwined problems of money and child-care. The course involved more outlay than she had anticipated - academic books were pricey, parking near the University was expensive, the Student Union nursery was expensive enough but since her son was desperately unhappy there she had had to make other arrangements which had involved even more expense. During the whole of the month before her first year exam, she was ill. Perhaps not surprisingly, she did not do as well as she had hoped. Yet the point of all this financial outlay, the reason her son had had to be in nurseries which he did not like, was her desire to complete the Access course and do law at university. How could she justify the financial and other cost to her family if she did not succeed? Exams are a measure of academic success. Of course, they were important to her. The last thing she wanted to hear was that first year exams were not important. She returned to second year with her self-confidence shaken and with no expectations that the staff would understand her problems. Once we understand the pressures Student Ten had coped with in her first year, her decision to leave when faced with the unexpected mountain of two A passes makes perfect sense.

4. Discussion and Implications

Given this story of why Student Ten left, it is all too easy for course providers to feel that this was an unfortunate case representative of many similar cases about which nothing can be done by the educational institutions. I suggest that this is not an adequate response. "Moved house", "Better option materialised" and the starred entries (*) for "Change/trouble in personal life" and "Ill-health" are the only reasons for leaving which have no bearing on the course. All other reasons given are connected to the experience of being on the course; for example, ill-health cited as an additional reason indicates the problem of catching up after missing classes, both in terms of academic work and in regaining a sense of belonging to the course. In particular, the last six reasons ("Pressure of juggling roles" to "Age") indicate

areas where, I would argue, appropriate support may have enabled the respondent to remain on the course. It is to these areas I now turn.

a) Women Returners

It was clear from this research that the women faced particular problems. The social pressure put on women is reflected in many of the reasons, including "moving house" (because a male partner changed jobs), "difficulty of child-care", "pressure of juggling roles" and "change/ trouble in personal life". Of course, deciding to leave a course in order to move to another area with one's husband is a personal decision, but it is also a socially expected one. The very fact that two men expected their wives to sacrifice their place on the Access course, and with it their hopes for going to university, indicates how women's aims and purposes in life can so easily be discounted. Women returning to education, and thereby indicating a desire to take control of the direction of their life, can also be perceived as threatening by their partners. Four of the ten women respondents experienced physical and/or verbal abuse from their male partners or ex-partners while on the Access course. This was not one of my preconceived ideas about why people might have left the course; such disclosures surprised and shocked me and I was not able to probe to discover whether the women themselves saw a connection between the abuse and their being students.

"Difficulty of child-care" and "Pressure of juggling roles" were exclusively problems for women. Despite eligibility for the Student Union crèche, lack of child-care facilities was seen as a problem by six women in the 1990/91 group. One woman felt unable to participate fully because of this, while for others it was one more burden which detracted from the experience of being on the course. Two mentioned it because they were aware of it as a problem for others. Affordable child-care provision would enable more students, particularly women, to complete the course. It would also improve the quality of the experience for other women by removing one burden from them. However, it is unrealistic to expect every educational provider to offer cheap, high quality child-care without greater resources being made available for that purpose. Nevertheless, educational providers have a duty to put pressure on those who control budgets in order that such child-care does become widely available for those who require it. In the meantime, course providers must acknowledge openly that many of their female students have to face the problem of finding affordable quality care for their children while they study. This does not necessarily mean providing such care. Women are used to arranging child-care, to coping with finding alternative arrangements at the last minute. What it does mean is course providers changing their internalised image of what a student is like so that female adult students are made to feel acceptable as they are. The pressure of juggling the roles of student, partner, mother, worker would be lessened if the role of student was seen as including, not excluding, the others.

b) Academic Facilities and Support

Academic facilities available to the students provoked a mixed response. When asked about the library, a minority were positive but most felt that there were not enough copies of books available in the library and some people had difficulty in buying books, either because of lack of money or because they were not in stock. Tutors who provided course material were lauded. Several people found using the library was too time consuming to fit in with their other commitments and so were forced to buy or share books. One student left the course in 1989 because necessary material was unavailable in the library and buying proved prohibitively expensive. Course providers must ensure that "access" is not unnecessarily denied to students because insufficient attention has been paid to ensuring supply of basic course materials. The effort made on this particular course to improve library services for Access students by, for example, having a named contact person for Access students on the library staff and increasing copies of basic text books and photocopies of important articles and extracts, was simple and effective.

The majority of respondents loved or hated study skills. The deciding factor seemed to be whether or not the student had other commitments which put pressure on their time management. For those who had, study skills was experienced as too generalised to be helpful and therefore a waste of limited time. Others who were not so pressurised for time found study skills useful in differing ways. Comments included, "it was a joy". This difference in perception of study skills support is worthy of attention since it indicates how ineffective such support can be if sufficient attention is not paid to the realities of adult life. Providers must assume that their adult students may have other pressing commitments in addition to their academic ones and offer support accordingly.

It was also clear from the research findings that some form of academic support for those who feel out of their depth in the first term because of their lack of previous education would enable more students, in particular those from traditionally non-participating groups, to complete the course. This would be in keeping with the major aim of Access courses which is to maximise opportunity. As it was, respondents felt reluctant to ask for help with specific academic problems, while those who did ask for help were reluctant to ask for as much help as they needed. Most of the respondents perceived the use of support services (guidance, counselling, complaints channel) as exceptional practice rather than as an integral part of the course. Complaints were felt to be difficult to make, partly out of fear that the complainer would suffer (a legacy from past experience rather than the Access course), and partly because appreciation of the effort put into the course by most of the staff generated a reluctance to make complaints about individual cases. The respondents also felt reluctant to ask for as much individual attention as they needed because this sort of attention was not accepted by the respondents as their legitimate right. Thus, the support services were not being used as efficiently as they could have been because they were not seen as an integral

part of the course. Improving the status of support service use would enable more students to be completers and would improve the quality of their experience as students. However, it should be noted that the respondents were not looking for provided answers to their problems. What they wanted was to be listened to, and the perceived gravity of their problems acknowledged. This approach is more respectful, and probably more effective, than trying to buoy the students through by down-playing their anxieties.

c) Personal Support

The process of leaving the course provides a good example of how personal support services were not being used effectively. The information obtained showed that the process of leaving varied considerably. Four respondents (3 in 1989/90, 1 in 1990/91) left without telling any staff on the course. One spoke of making an "unconscious decision", the others of missing a lecture or tutorial and simply not returning. They had felt too guilty, embarrassed or depressed to use available guidance at the time, but seemed to welcome the opportunity to explain to the interviewer why they had left. Others felt able to reveal underlying reasons which, for various reasons, they had not divulged at the time. In some cases, because underlying reasons were not explained, the support offered was inappropriate. For example, the impossibility of complying with an imminent essay deadline was used by at least four people as the opportunity to indicate a wish to leave and was met with offers of flexibility which would have helped if work pressure was the problem, but since this was only a "cover" this support was not effective. Two people mentioned that the staff member they spoke to emphasised inappropriately the importance of the course above other commitments which the student prioritised. One person felt that the staff member whose support was sought devalued the importance to the student of the particular worry. Despite this only one person said that they felt they could complain and that person was unhappy about how the complaint was dealt with. Again, it would seem that listening to and acknowledging the perceived gravity of an individual's worries may have proved more efficient than trying to buoy the students through.

d) Group Identity

Most people enjoyed and benefited from the social mix of students on the course, although some felt very aware of a gap between themselves and the rest of the group. This was perceived of as an age gap, but, in reality, age could not have been the explanatory factor in every case. For these students, a sense of belonging to the group was lacking. Those who had other commitments felt they did not have time to socialise and felt they did not

"belong" because of this. Most people mixed well on the course; mutual encouragement, sharing, and a supportive family feeling were described. One area which could be improved was that the transition from first term to second term involved choosing subjects and therefore being in new tutorial groups. It was clear that the benefits from friendships and mutual support built up in the first term were not being utilised in the second term because of this change in course structure. A timetabled means of maintaining first term tutorial groups would reduce non-completion of the course by improving group identity and mutual support. It would have to be timetabled because so many students are pressured for time.

e) Staff Development and Quality of Teaching

The respondents were also asked about their views on teaching and learning in general and of teaching and learning experienced on the Access course, in particular. The general questions were asked partly to begin the interviews on a non-threatening topic, and partly because I had an idea that this would uncover some underlying attitudes explaining reasons for leaving which might not come out in a more direct way. In fact, both these purposes were served, the topic generating a relaxed, talkative atmosphere and a reflective analysis by the individual which uncovered some interesting points. The ideal Access tutor, based on respondents' definitions of good teaching for adults, combined enthusiasm and up-to-date knowledge of their subject with an informal style which encouraged questions and discussion. The ideal tutor was also interested in every student, treated the student as a mature equal with valuable life experience upon which further learning was built, and enabled the student to engage in self-directed learning.

It was clear from people's responses that their previous experiences of education influenced their perception of the Access course. Working class respondents (one exception) and four of the middle class women had left school at sixteen or earlier because the prevailing attitude at home and at school was that higher education was, typically, for middle class males. For them, the Access course represented access to a societal good from which they had previously been excluded. For some of these respondents, this meant that their own expectations of the standard expected of them was extremely high, such that they could hardly accept that they were doing well. I think this attitude reflected an avoidance of the understanding that if they could do well then their previous exclusion from educational opportunity could be seen as an injustice and not as a result of their lack of intelligence. A few respondents left, at least partly, because they lost confidence in their own abilities precisely because they were doing well and could not credit this, despite the support of their tutors. Part of the reason they left when they did was to ensure they left before they were "found out" as lacking. Comments like, "I left while I could still feel good about it" were made. This is an interesting and important irony which I suspect is repeated on a wider scale.

The Access course was seen in a very positive light by those whose experience of schooling had been negative ("the school system failed me", "it all went wrong in primary"). However, others who had had recent experience of education at work, in college or at the Centre itself, which had led them to have higher expectations about teaching style, were not so positive - generally, they wanted, and expected, more of the ideal outlined above. It can be seen, therefore, that asking general and specific questions about attitudes to teaching and learning generated material that helped to explain both what people expected from the course and underlying attitudes that helped to explain why some students left.

The experience of being on the course was a further area which the research covered. Initial reaction to the experience of returning to education as Access students seemed to be, not surprisingly, a mixture of excitement, nervousness and pride. The atmosphere was described as "friendly", "comfortable", one of mutual support. The first term was as expected by five respondents (all of whom had attended more than one information day) but surprised others by the range of subjects covered and the amount of work. When asked about their views on the work they were expected to do on their own, most respondents felt they had underestimated the time that would be needed to cope with the workload. In addition, there was a strong perception in 1989/90 and 1990/91 that the marking of assignments was unfair: a disparity between different tutors' standards, effort not being reflected in the mark, lack of clarity about what was required. It was evident, too, from the shift in responses taken as year groups that efforts made to improve monitoring of marking were an important improvement. The difference in experiences for those doing the course in 1991 /92 compared to the 1989/90 group indicates that efforts to encourage staff development and improve the quality of teaching are effective in reducing student loss.

f) Discontinuing Students, not "Drop-outs"

Half the respondents saw Access as a way of achieving their aim of entry to a particular degree course, five to an unspecified degree, and two saw it primarily in personal development terms. Most did also see it as a way of compensating for earlier exclusion from higher education. Comments like "I had the learning bug" or "I had a need to learn" were also made. These aims suggest that the selection procedure picked up people with very clear ideas of what they wished to get out of the course. Pre-course guidance and information was, thus, found to be effective.

Leaving affected the way some people felt about themselves. Some felt "sad/sorry/like a failure/ guilty/ upset". Two felt "relieved", one "glad to have left". Some, of course, felt a mixture of these, "a huge relief, but sorry too". Leaving also affected people's plans for their future. Three people felt leaving made university an impossible dream, "an opportunity lost", "all the doors are closed", "upset, but I can't change my circumstances". Others had

to resign themselves to taking a longer route to a university degree (Open University, for example), or to postpone their university hopes meantime. For some people leaving meant that their plans for a university degree had been abandoned. Nevertheless, without exception, the respondents felt that the course had left them with a positive legacy. Typical comments were, "I enjoyed the buzz", "it made me aware of my capabilities", "more courses like it should be available". Eleven of the fourteen respondents and both people who sent notes are exploring the possibility of, or have gone on to, other forms of further or higher education, a finding which emphasises the positive legacy of the Access course and which should encourage the course organisers to do all they can to minimise future student withdrawal as it indicates that highly motivated students are leaving.

Five people said they would like to return to the Access course if financial support and/or child-care facilities were available, underlining the substantial nature of these lacks as barriers to education. The research showed that financial support for part-time mature students is crucial if "access" is to be meaningful and would enable more students to complete the course. It is recognised that this could only be an outcome of a change of policy at national level. In my view, the responses imply that student selection on this course was effective. None of the sixteen people who provided information for this research could be seen as "drop-outs" or as having been offered a place on the course unjustifiably. Since so many expressed the desire to return to the course when circumstances were more favourable, it may be that this opportunity could be explicitly offered to those who are forced to withdraw due to unexpected life circumstances. This, too, would be in keeping with the aims of Access courses.

Conclusion

Returning to education is not easy for adults partly because they have other commitments (and why should they not?). But, in addition, often adults return to education with a legacy from school of failure and of lack of opportunity, and a legacy from society about their age, or class, or about being female. These things are not taken sufficient account of and, unless they are, adult students will continue to leave courses because the negative side of the balance tips too far down. It could be argued that bringing these issues into the open during any course for adult returners would be a valuable educational experience in its own right, and would serve as an indicator that the course organisers recognise the part played by the education system in the burden carried by many adult returners. As one student said,

> Most of my problems were caused by the education system in the first place.

It may be that this kind of acknowledgement would reduce the negative effect of these issues sufficiently to allow more students to complete courses.

The research did show that most people do not explain fully to course staff why they

leave. The methodology was effective in eliciting a fuller picture of why people had left this Access course. None of the reasons was unusual or unexpected, they could be replicated in most "drop-out" studies; what was unusual was the depth of information obtained about the precise combinations of reasons why individuals left and about what could have helped students to complete the course successfully. I was surprised by the strength of positive feeling about the course among the respondents. What came over very strongly in the interviews and questionnaires was the tremendous effort these students had made to tackle the course in addition to the responsibilities they already carried and how very hard it is to be a mature student with no financial backing in the form of a grant and no child-care provision or allowance. Their efforts should make everyone interested in furthering adult education much more aware of the need to push for financial resources to back up the policies for "access" and for increasing mature student numbers in higher education. Their efforts should also encourage course providers to do as much as possible to relieve the many problem areas too often regarded as insignificant or as personal matters.

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